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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 1729
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 0656
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 0190
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 5199
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0084
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000025

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN RETURNS TO RHETORICAL FORM OVER
GAZA CRISIS

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a Justice and Development Party (AKP) group meeting on January 6, PM Erdogan delivered a speech condemning Israel for its attacks on the Gaza Strip, labeling them a "black stain" on humanity. This is a return to form for a politician whose traditional use of anti-Israeli rhetoric has only been stemmed in recent months because of Ankara's efforts to negotiate peace between Israel and Syria. There are two differences this time: first, the personal nature of Erdogan's speech and, second, his criticism of international organizations and Western countries, in a charged pre-election atmosphere. End summary.

Erdogan Speaks Out on Gaza

¶2. (SBU) In the hours leading up to a "debate" in the Grand National Assembly over the Gaza crisis, Prime Minister Erdogan delivered a harsh speech to fellow AKP members expressing his concerns and disappointments with Israel. He claimed that Israel's response to HAMAS "mistakes" was disproportionate, creating a human tragedy among the Palestinian civilians in Gaza. He also complained that the attacks were a culmination of Israeli disregard for the terms of the previous cease-fire, claiming that Israel's maintenance of embargoes against the Gaza Strip was in bad faith. He called on Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak to drop political motivations ahead of February elections, stop attacks immediately, establish a cease-fire, and lift embargoes and border restrictions against Gaza, lest history "try" them for the "black stain" they are casting on humanity.

¶3. (SBU) Erdogan also lamented that international actors - the UN, EU, US, OIC -- many of which were quick to act during the Georgia crisis last summer, have remained silent, challenging Turkish faith in their efficacy, and highlighting a "multiple standard" that they hold in relations with others. Erdogan framed the crisis in personal terms, claiming that he himself had witnessed the hardships that Palestinians have had to suffer, as he, as PM, was forced to wait a half hour at the Ramallah border gate. He highlighted

the efforts Turkey had been conducting to bring peace among Israel, the Palestinians, and their neighbors, and expressed distress that Israel's military actions could bring all of those efforts to naught.

¶4. (C) Erdogan has frequently utilized such personal and emotional rhetoric against the government of Israel as a means for rallying his party during such meetings. Erdogan's speeches in the past were similar, if not harsher; Erdogan has referred to Israel as a "terrorist state" in past party group meetings. It is the Erdogan of the past half-year that has been the exception. He adopted a more muted style toward Israel in the weeks before Turkey-led indirect mediation between Israel and Syria were made public, even refraining from criticism when the deaths of civilians in a series of Israeli air strikes on Gaza in the summer of 2008 made sensational headlines in Turkey. Erdogan's reversion to type is, in part, a symptom of the stall in the peace process in which he is invested personally; with Damascus putting that process on hold, Erdogan's hand is again free to criticize Israel. It also reflects his rage (never far from the surface) at what he considers disrespectful treatment from Israeli PM Olmert, who had visited Turkey a mere four days before the airstrikes began.

¶5. (C) Erdogan resisted, in this case, a harsher response, choosing instead to chide opposition parties for their calls for severing relations with Israel. Noting that previous governments had rode out strained relations with Israel, he quipped, "We are not running a grocery store, we are running

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the Republic of Turkey." Compared to previous comments, he also tempered the tone of his rhetoric: though harsh with Israel, his criticism of the West was one of disappointment, not anger. He pointedly avoided descending into cheap anti-Israeli, anti-Semitic, and anti-Western rants by focusing on the specific actions of the actors in play without resorting to generalizations. Contrary to press reports, he did not/not accuse the US of unfairly supporting Israel.

AKP Not to Be Outflanked

¶6. (C) Given the increasingly tense political environment in the run-up to March local elections in Turkey, the Gaza attacks are ill-timed to produce a cool-headed, constructive response on the part of the AKP. An increasing number of voters are becoming disillusioned with government performance, but are uncommitted to other parties, as evidenced by growing numbers of respondents who are undecided which party they support in national polls. Vahit Erdem, an AKP MP and head of Turkey's NATO Parliamentary Group, underscored this point to us on January 7. He said he "personally regretted" some statements in the January 6 parliamentary discussion and some of PM Erdogan's comments during the AKP meeting, both of which he attended. Regarding Erdogan's address to the AKP parliamentary group, Erdem said he would have preferred PM Erdogan be more circumspect in his statement, but said that Erdogan had the approaching municipal elections in mind and to ensure that his political opponents, particularly the Democratic Society Party (DTP, the primary Kurdish-aligned party), could not use it to advantage against the AKP. The seriousness of Erdogan's domestic political concerns could easily be misunderstood, Erdem explained: should the AKP be seen to be losing support during local elections the government could face a call for early general elections

¶7. (C) Although DTP is AKP's primary threat in mayoralty races in the largely conservative and Kurdish southeast, it is not the only party that can pull votes from AKP on the Gaza issue. The opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) was more harsh than Erdogan in its pronouncements. Kursat Atilgan, a former Air Force general representing MHP in

Parliament from Adana, claimed in an article in the January 7 "Today's Zaman" that "there has never been such a disproportionate war on Earth as the Israeli offensive against the Palestinians," and insinuated there was an undisclosed ulterior motive for the "cruel" offensive beyond crippling HAMAS. Former diplomat and current MHP MP Deniz Bolukbasi, in his speech before the Grand National Assembly, not only criticized Israel's actions in equally strong terms as Erdogan, but also criticized the AKP government for being ineffective in its diplomatic efforts and for maintaining ties to Israel. Despite Erdogan's rebuttal to this line of attack, the message is one that resonates with the conservative population of the Anatolian heartland, AKP's strongest base of voters in the past two general elections.

18. (C) The religiously-oriented Felicity (Saadet) Party is another potential rival to AKP on the right. (Note: Both AKP and Saadet emerged from the ashes of a long line of parties banned for anti-secular activities.) Though Saadet is seen as a political dead-end, a conservative wing of AKP supporters nonetheless empathizes with its more conservative platform. In reaction to the Gaza attacks, it organized a protest in Istanbul -- the largest demonstration against Israel since the attacks -- with Chairman Numan Kurtulmus appearing in person and spiritual leader (and former PM) Necmettin Erbakan appearing via video link, to drum up emotions and vote potential. Without any seats in Parliament, Saadet needs to resort to attention-grabbing demonstrations and extreme rhetoric to have its message

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heard, but is not accountable for the subsequent increase in political tension it creates. Moreover, Saadet supporters do not easily differentiate between support for Palestinians and support for HAMAS; at their party congress in October, the observing HAMAS representative received a roaring standing ovation bested only by the applause given to Erbakan, Kurtulmus, and outgoing chairman, Recai Kutan.

Comment

19. (C) Erdogan has been careful to allow himself room to back away from criticism of Israel without appearing weak. In an environment where all media outlets and opposition parties have been registering outrage, Erdogan could ill afford to appear to be soft on an Israel accused of killing innocent Muslim civilians, especially children. While his speech marks a return to the fiery anti-Israel rhetoric of the past, it was less heated than previous Erdogan blasts and should be seen in the context of nationwide local elections only eleven weeks away. Absent a cease-fire, if AKP perceives it is being outflanked by DTP, MHP and Saadet on the right, there will be more of the same from Erdogan, and potentially worse.

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